

BY MICHAEL CALLAHAN

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL McCORMICK

For me and an entire generation of Philadelphians, local broadcasters of yore like Gene London, Jim O'Brien and Hank Sperka were certified celebrities. Why can't today's bland batch of talking heads match up? A requiem for the Philly TV star



Where have you gone, Sally Starr?



Quigley Mansion held endless fascination.

This happens when you're a child living in a twin house with a black-and-white television and only three networks to choose from, one of them with a weekly program called *Cartoon Corners* that featured a spooky manor accessed by a secret tunnel.

Quigley Mansion was, of course, fiction, nothing more than plywood and paint and flashing strobes providing the occasional ominous bolt of lightning. But for kids who grew up in Philadelphia during a certain set of wonder years—mine being the late 1960s and early '70s—Quigley, the tunnel, and most of all the *Cartoon Corners* host, a skinny, flamboyant dream weaver named Gene London, left us positively agog. Through Gene's riveting storytelling, all bulging eyes and witchy cackles, we were catapulted into other worlds not by Pixar animation, but by the sheer power of a great, well-told tale.

Gene, 80, is still built like the skinny scarecrow he was in my youth, but his jet-black matinee-idol hair is now a tangled haystack of gray, which lends him a slightly

mad-scientist look. For years he lived a rather Norma Desmond-y existence in his Manhattan apartment, surrounded by memorabilia from his time as a Philly kids'-show host and his impressive collection of dead movie queens' gowns. (He now has homes in both Florida and rural Pennsylvania, where the costumes are warehoused.) There is a certain pathos about him, his conversation a running dialogue of his many accomplishments ("My ratings were staggeringly high"), his fans ("Kevin Bacon loves me, too"), his standing among the other local television stars of his day ("I was from New York and sophisticated; she was very fun, like a barmaid," he says of legendary cowgirl Sally Starr). He's still big; it's television that got small.

Though born and raised in Cleveland, Gene London was handsome in an 8th and Tasker way, a perfect fit as local Philadelphia television found its footing in the '60s and '70s. I've tracked him down because of a mystery I've been mulling of late: why those folks of my wonder years, the ones

who were the faces of television in Philadelphia, seemed so different then—and why our relationship with them, as a city, seemed different as well.

Gene sighs. "Of course we've lost something," he tells me. "We've lost so much. You have to remember that back in those days, kids would watch anything. The world was different. There weren't outside forces then, the outside world. There weren't a thousand channels."

If you look at old reels of these newscasts and kiddie shows, you see that the people who talked to us through our TV screens weren't polished. A few looked as though they'd just wandered in from some taproom in Germantown to find themselves staring into a camera. But they were the closest things we had to celebrities in Philadelphia, their sightings in the odd supermarket enough to set off small riots.

More than that, they had something. Something very basic, very necessary, and something we wildly underrated.

They were us.



PREVIOUS PAGE: WALLPAPER; YETVE TAKOR; GETTY IMAGES; TV: DAVIES AND ITTNER; GETTY IMAGES; LONSON, NORMAN HIREWS, STAR: MELTZER; TEMPLE URBAN ARCHIVES; DR. SROCK; COURTESY WPHL-TV; PIXANNE, NORMAN LEVINSON, KATE; PHILLY NEWS.



AS SEEN ON TV
Clockwise from top left: Don Tollefson and Jim Gardner (1981); Pixanne (1968); Chief Halftown and Sally Starr (1956); Trudy Haynes (1972); Captain and Mrs. Noah; Gene London (1963).



THIS PRESENT: LONDON TOLLEFSON-STARR, HAFNES, TEMPLE URBAN ARCHIVES; PIXANNE, JIM GARDNER (© JIM GARDNER)

For more than two decades, deadpan and droll "Big Al" Meltzer was one of the deans of Philly TV sports—the anti-John Clark, who appears to have just downed a can of Red Bull.

that familiar timpani-heavy opening anthem. But my spirits soon flagged. The "big story on Action News" was area

television defined my generation in a way it never did that of my parents. To know anyone who had been on television was akin to knowing someone who had been in a movie, even if that TV appearance was a fleeting audience scan on *Dialing for Dollars*, the cheesy Channel 6 version of *The Price Is Right*. In the YouTube Age of Overexposure, that type of magic has long since dissipated. I personally haven't watched a local newscast in years.

So one recent night when I was watching something else—the finale of *So You Think You Can Dance* (don't judge me)—I kept the TV on to catch the beginning of the Fox 29 news. The lead story was about a South Philly woman who had received a big water bill. I'm not making that up. A few weeks earlier, I had watched the venerable Action News at 11 o'clock, momentarily cheered by

thunderstorms, replete with time-lapsed footage of a wet street outside the station window. While it was nice to see Jim Gardner still working the Abner Doubleday 'stache, the newscast itself was a numbing recitation of a Logan fire, a burglary spree in East Falls, an accidental drowning. More than two minutes were devoted to a test of anti-wrinkle creams and feminine razors. There was a YouTube video of a snake slithering across the hood of a moving car—in Tennessee. And a meaty recap of the finale of *The Bachelorette*. Remember the old TV news adage "If it bleeds, it leads"? While I've been away from the news, such wisdom seems to have been replaced with "If you don't care, it's on the air."

It's a little head-shaking. When I was growing up, local news was appointment television in Philadelphia. With only three TV stations, we were a captive audience, so

tuning in served a practical purpose; back in those days, there was some substantive, if not truly investigative, journalism going on. There were actually editorials on the news, with KYW general manager Alan J. Bell coming on to bellyache about the building of the Center City commuter tunnel, constantly bleating, "But you don't want that tunnel." And me, at the age of 10, thinking, *Oh, I don't know, Alan, I do want a tunnel*. I had no idea what it was all about. But I knew who Alan J. Bell was, and that he was making a serious point. He had me thinking about civics, about the city I lived in, and about why everyone was so charged up about a public-works project, even if I was too young to comprehend it.

Look, I'm not trying to argue that local news in the '60s and '70s was *60 Minutes*. It wasn't. In 1978, Action News's Hank Sperka once reported on the safety of the Spectrum's roof by jumping up and down on it. On another occasion, in Rome to cover the canonization of St. John Neumann, he

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Philly TV Stars

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asked a bunch of Philly pilgrims standing outside the Colosseum, "How does this compare to Connie Mack Stadium?" Edward R. Murrow he was not.

Local TV news has always held a place for the silly—it's part of its charm. Bill Kuster, the KYW weatherman, used to give the forecast using cartoon characters he labeled "The Kuster Kids." Jim O'Brien, whose death in a skydiving accident in 1983 became Philly's JFK assassination moment, didn't deliver a forecast as much as he performed one, with high-pressure systems the "good guys" and low-pressure ones "bad guys"—weather as cabaret act. Sperka, his eyeglasses like two small windshields, became Action News's "Sidewalk Gourmet," typically surrounded by a harem of girls in feathered Farrah Fawcett hairdos as he ate baklava in some Greek restaurant and generally acted like your lecherous uncle.

But maybe that's the point: The people who delivered our news looked like us; they talked like us; they seemed to care about the same things we did. It wasn't the content that made those newscasts resonate as much as it was the people on them. I always thought Action News's Cathy Gandolfo seemed like she'd grown up in South Philly and graduated from St. Maria Goretti. I recently discovered she grew up in South Philly ... and graduated from Maria Goretti.

"There was an absolute different philosophy in the building of personality," says Lew Klein, the program and production manager of WFIL (which is now WPVI 6ABC) from 1957 to 1968. "There was a difference in the early days of continuity, of establishing and building local personalities, and the investment that you made to keep them. Now, for many people it's just a stepping-stone to other positions. There's not the continuity, the connection."

The people talking to us through the screen during the golden age of television did so in a dinner-table manner telegraphing that we weren't merely their audience, but also their neighbors. It was *personal* for us, and they got that. They were, for the most part, unpolished and unremarkable and even, in some cases, unattractive. Which is why, perhaps, they were able to project such authenticity, even when they were jumping up and down on the roof of the Spectrum.

The whole thing worked, in a way that seems antique and yet more charming and

genuine than the slick rat-a-tat-tat and general inanity of today's local broadcasts. "I can't emphasize enough that the early days of television were like a three-ring circus," says Al Meltzer. "Sets fell down, cameras dollied into each other, things fell apart in the control room." For more than two decades, deadpan and droll "Big Al" was one of the deans of Philly television sports—the anti-John Clark, who appears to have just downed a can of Red Bull. "Now, with 400 channels, there are lots of jobs. But what you don't have is lots of *experience*."

What the hell happened? Somewhere along the way, we lost not just those people, but our bond to both them and the newscasts they hosted. Today's local TV landscape seems like nothing but a window display of interchangeable mannequins; I wouldn't know Susan Barnett if she ran me over with her car. Think about it: Would John Facenda, the founding father of Philly broadcasting, stand a chance at an on-air job today? His gravely delivery might have catapulted him into the city's public consciousness, but his Bela Lugosi looks and somber persona would leave him DOA before the first screen test now.

To be fair, much of this isn't the local affiliates' fault. As the networks grew in stature and influence, they gobbled up more and more local airtime, even as affiliates were figuring out that it was cheaper to buy syndicated programming than to produce their own. Combined, this had the effect of de-localizing local TV, killing broadcasts of events like the Devon Horse Show and Penn and Temple football, which used to be part of WFIL's programming. As sex began to sell, its effects trickled down, sweeping out the Cathy Gandolfo types and ushering in Alycia Lane and all the Breck girls 2.0. Local news devolved from kitchen-table discourse to beacon of local glamour, its telecasts slathered in Pepsodent and carnival barkerism. At the same time, the American nuclear family began to fracture, elbowing dents into rituals like communal viewing of the news. Finally, cable exploded onto the scene, allowing viewers to curate their own information and plunging a dagger into local TV that has it still bleeding today.

Nowhere was this Darwinism more evident than with the kiddie shows. *Sesame Street* delivered the first shot across the

Philly TV Stars

bow in 1969, followed by FCC attempts in the '70s to crack down on advertising targeted to kids. Eventually, kid-show hosts were barred from peddling products, meaning no more of Channel 6's Chief Halftown (an actual true-blood Seneca) guzzling Bosco. Without those ad dollars, the local shows died quick deaths.

WHYY did a terrific documentary about the kiddie hosts a few years ago. Watching it, you see that Sally Starr may have been a cowgirl from Kansas City, but her sass and sparkle (and pillowy hips, for that matter) were pure Philly. Dr. Shock, the Frankenstein-like who hosted a late-night raft of horror movies on WPHL, was actually a two-bit Manayunk magician named Joe Zawislak. East Oak Lane's Jane Norman, our own Mary Martin, flew through the air as Pixanne. And of course there was *Captain Noah's Magical Ark*, which ran on WPVI from 1967 to 1994, always ending with the "Red and yellow and pink and green/Purple and orange and blue/I can sing a rainbow" theme. Captain and Mrs. Noah (she died in June) sang the tune to close the WHYY documentary. As I watched it, the sentimentality walloped me unexpectedly in the face, and I cried.

Perhaps it was because I now realize that the local news and its offshoot programming—like Sunday afternoon's hokey, perma-grinning organist Larry Ferrari, whose show ran for 43 years on WFIL (43 years! Of a guy playing the organ!)—was something more than just information or entertainment. It was part of the soundtrack of Philadelphia, the elevator music piped in as we rode through our days. The folks who appeared on our screens weren't merely our anchors or reporters or hosts, but our stars. "Sally [Starr] was at every parade. Captain Noah was at every ribbon-cutting," Lew Klein says. "They were part of the city. And our philosophy at Channel 6 was that we pushed our people out. Today, they're not connected to the community in terms of activity, and to some degree, that's understandable: When you look at the people on the news, how many come and go and come and go? They aren't of the city in the way they used to be."

As he walks through the Country Squire Diner in Broomall, I recognize Al Meltzer instantly. At 83, he still has the tower-

ing stature (he's six-four), droopy bassetthound face and ice cap of hair that made him such an imposing presence on local sportscasts, first on WFIL, then later at KYW. He's had a hip replacement and two back operations, but in his Big Five golf shirt and blue slacks, he's still every inch "Big Al." Meltzer has written a memoir, fittingly titled *Big Al*, that will be published this month by Camino Books. It's not great literature, but its meticulous anecdotes throw into sharp focus all that we've lost on the local airwaves.

He orders a fruit salad. I tell him I suspect he ate far better during his years on the air, and he laughs. "When Leonard Tose owned the Eagles," Al says, "this was every reporter's number one stop in the National Football League. I kid you not. As you know, they feed the press whatever on Sundays. Not Leonard. You want lobster? You want steak? At the Monday press conferences there would be shrimp, scallops. Leonard may have been the best and worst owner in the history of football."

There is, of course, a danger in getting too mired in nostalgia. As a medium, television has always tried to stay ahead of the curve. But it was Philadelphia that gave TV some of its earliest and most innovative programming: *American Bandstand*, *The Mike Douglas Show*. What, I wonder, are we giving it now?

This is one of the things I ask Pat Ciarrocchi when I meet her on a sunny afternoon a week later, in the sleek headquarters of CBS 3. I adore Pat. She's one of the last of the "old guard" left in television news here, a local girl (born and raised in Chester County) on our airwaves for almost 30 years. And she still has the same heart-shaped face, which when she smiles makes her seem almost beatific, as if she should be wearing a habit, wondering how to solve a problem like Maria.

I ask her if she understands what I'm trying to get at here, that it isn't just that local TV has changed and evolved with the times—fair enough—but that something has evaporated in the process. Something I suspect we've undervalued.

"There is a difference," she replies, almost in a whisper, as we sit in her roomy cube in the CBS 3 newsroom. "When I was young, it was hard to determine the difference. The anchors, the people there before me—there was a unique charisma to each one of them. They seemed like they


had their own unique character. Today ..." She trails off. "I think there is an *effort* to develop that kind of uniqueness."

I don't know if I believe her. I do know if that's true, it's not working. Earlier, I sat on the set of her noon infotainment program, *Talk Philly*, watching her interview an entrepreneur who runs a business housing college kids in deluxe apartments. With Pat cooing over the apartment listings like they were jewelry at Tiffany, the whole thing smacked more of a promo than an interview. Afterward, she admitted the segment was, in fact, an ad—paid content plopped into the middle of the broadcast. She didn't look happy about it. But a tight smile soon gripped her face. "We have to keep it going!" she said, a bit too brightly.

Do we? Perhaps we simply can't hold onto our past, no matter how much we'd like to. And is it fair to constantly reflect on how the "old ways" were better, when often we have nothing more than our collective gut telling us that's true? Would we really be happier, would life truly be better, *without* the teeming buffet of choices we now have on cable and the Internet? Isn't this the American marketplace at work—out with the old, in with the new?

And yet, when it comes to television, at least, I can't shake the feeling that the marketplace has gotten it wrong. Because we haven't just lost the connection to local news—we've lost yet another connective thread to each other. When I was growing up in Philly, watching the news was something you did as a family and discussed as a community. The people on the screen were people we all had in common, a shared part of our daily lives. Like our sports teams, cheesesteaks and burly politics, they stitched us together as a city. As we unplug from them, we disconnect from one another, just a tiny bit more. Thrown together in elevators or doctors' offices, we no longer ask, "Did you see that story on the news?" but rather cordon off into our own vacuum-sealed bubbles, disappearing into our Droids and BlackBerrys.

I can't say I'd respond to a rallying cry to tune in every night at 11; a steady diet of Nydia Han product-testing and *Bachelorette* recaps would put me over the edge.

But I could probably still be convinced to sing a rainbow on occasion. 

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